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United Nations

BYU Kennedy Center

**36th Annual
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY MODEL UNITED NATIONS
CONFERENCE**

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Esteemed Delegates,

SECRETARIAT

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Security Council

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*United Nations Children's
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Akira Contreras
*Organization of American
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*General Assembly Third
Committee*

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Kelly Russell
Executive Director

DAVID M. KENNEDY
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INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Cory Leonard
Assistant Director

Welcome to the 36th annual Brigham Young University Model United Nations Conference (BYUMUN)! It is an honor to welcome such a thoughtful and passionate group of delegates who are willing to engage with today's most pressing global challenges and represent the values of diplomacy, dialogue, and international cooperation.

My name is Jessie Moore, and I will serve as your director for the General Assembly Third Committee (GA3), also known as the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee. I'm currently a junior at BYU, majoring in Political Science with a minor in Russian, with a strong interest in international law and diplomacy. This past year, I had the chance to represent the Republic of Türkiye on the Economic and Social Council at the National Model United Nations (NMUN) Conference in New York City. That experience deepened my appreciation for the power of collaboration, compromise, and creative thinking, and I hope this conference will do the same for you.

This year, the topics before the GA3 are as follows:

- I. Mitigating the Role of Social Media in Fueling Political Polarization and Human Rights Abuses
- II. Human Rights of Prisoners and Conditions of Incarceration

Both topics address critical human rights concerns that affect vulnerable populations and the stability of our global community. This guide is intended to support your research by offering background context and key resources. However, it is not a replacement for your own research and investigation into your country's stance and the broader international dialogue. The insights and solutions you bring to committee sessions will be shaped by the depth of your preparation. As you explore these agenda items, remember to craft proposals that reflect your Member State's priorities and positions on global issues. What you gain from this experience will depend on the effort you put in, but I'm sure that you'll leave this conference with greater knowledge and confidence. If you have any questions along the way, please feel free to reach out. I look forward to meeting you and I'm excited to see the unique perspectives you bring to the committee.

Sincerely,
Jessie Moore: Director, General Assembly Third Committee (GA3)
Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee mjessiea@byu.edu

Committee History

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) was established in 1945 following the devastation of World War II, with the mission of promoting international peace, security, and cooperation. Today, the UN has grown to include 193 Member States and serves as a central platform for dialogue and multilateral diplomacy.¹ One of the UN's six principal organs is the General Assembly (GA), the only body in which all Member States have equal representation, each with one vote regardless of size or power.

The General Assembly is divided into six main committees, each tasked with deliberating on specific areas of concern.² The Third Committee, formally known as the Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (GA3), is responsible for addressing a wide range of human rights and social development issues.³ These include the protection of fundamental freedoms, the rights of indigenous and displaced peoples, the elimination of racism and discrimination, the advancement of women, and social topics such as youth development, the treatment of refugees, and the rights of persons with disabilities.

The GA3's work directly supports the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Many of the Committee's priority areas, such as ending poverty, reducing inequalities, and ensuring peace, justice, and strong institutions, are integral to the SDGs' mission of a more inclusive, just, and sustainable world.⁴ By considering reports from the Human Rights Council, the High Commissioner for Refugees, and other UN bodies, GA3 shapes resolutions that guide Member States toward policies and initiatives that advance these global targets.

Mandate, Functions, and Powers

The GA3 functions primarily as a forum for discussion and recommendation. Its work helps shape global norms and guides the international community's approach to human rights and humanitarian concerns. The committee collaborates closely with key UN bodies such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Human Rights Council (HRC). It also reviews reports from special rapporteurs and independent experts, providing states with an opportunity to respond to international scrutiny.

¹ "United Nations Charter (1945)." National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/united-nations-charter. Accessed 9 August 2025.

² "Main Bodies." United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/main-bodies>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

³ "Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues." United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/third>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

⁴ "Functions and Powers of the General Assembly." United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/about/background>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

⁵ "In Hard-Hitting Human Rights Address, Guterres Calls for Urgent Action on Gaza, Authoritarianism and Climate Justice." UN News, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/07/1165497>. July 25, 2025.

Current Priorities

As the world faces growing challenges from war, political oppression, and displacement, the committee's role in reaffirming human dignity remains as vital as ever. Secretary-General António Guterres has highlighted the importance of defending human rights as one of the UN's top priorities, particularly in the face of rising authoritarianism, inequality, and global instability.⁵

Conclusion

While GA3 does not hold enforcement power, its influence is valuable in the way that it helps forge international consensus and pressures states to uphold their human rights obligations. Its recommendations often lay the groundwork for future resolutions and policies at both the national and international level. Through debate and multilateral engagement, GA3 plays a critical role in strengthening the UN's broader mission to uphold the dignity and rights of all people.

¹ "United Nations Charter (1945)." National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/united-nations-charter. Accessed 9 August 2025.

² "Main Bodies." United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/main-bodies>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

³ "Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues." United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/third>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

⁴ "Functions and Powers of the General Assembly." United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/about/background>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

⁵ "In Hard-Hitting Human Rights Address, Guterres Calls for Urgent Action on Gaza, Authoritarianism and Climate Justice." UN News, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/07/1165497>. July 25, 2025.

Annotated Bibliography

“Functions and Powers of the General Assembly.” United Nations. Accessed August 9, 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/ga/about/background.shtml>.

This source is an official United Nations webpage detailing the functions and powers of the General Assembly. It outlines the GA’s role within the UN system, including its authority to discuss and make recommendations on international issues, approve the UN budget, and oversee the election of Security Council and Economic and Social Council members. Because it comes directly from the UN, it is a highly credible and authoritative resource, making it useful for understanding the GA’s mandate, responsibilities, and procedural framework.

“In Hard-Hitting Human Rights Address, Guterres Calls for Urgent Action on Gaza, Authoritarianism and Climate Justice.” UN News. July 25, 2025. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/07/1165497>.

This UN News article reports on a July 25, 2025 address by Secretary General Guterres, in which he called for urgent global action on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the rise of authoritarianism, and climate justice. It offers some insight into the UN’s current priorities and concerns. As an official UN publication, it is a credible and timely resource for understanding the organization’s stance on pressing international issues.

“Main Bodies.” United Nations. Accessed August 9, 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/main-bodies>.

From the United Nations website, this explains the main bodies of the UN, their structure, and functions. Since this comes from the UN’s primary website, it is a very helpful, clear, and reliable source. It gives a good overview of the GA and its role within the UN.

“Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues.” United Nations. Accessed August 9, 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/ga/third>.

This page on the United Nations website gives a brief overview of the GA Third Committee on Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues. From this page you can find other helpful documents and related sites to better understand the Committee.

“United Nations Charter (1945).” National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed August 9, 2025. www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/united-nations-charter.

This is an important resource because it is the official charter for the UN. Sourced from the National Archives, this is a primary source document. Being the foundational document of the UN, all powers, functions, and mandates can be found in it for the GA3 and any other UN committee.

I. Mitigating the Role of Social Media in Fueling Political Polarization and Human Rights Abuses

“As polarization deepens and human rights are trampled, peace within communities is undermined...Our obligation is to act together for peace in all its dimensions.”
- António Guterres, UN Secretary General

Introduction

Social media platforms have fundamentally reshaped the way individuals communicate, access information, and participate in public life. They have empowered citizen movements, amplified marginalized voices, and enabled real-time engagement in political discourse across borders. However, while these platforms have democratized communication, they have also introduced complex challenges. Scholars have identified that the same design features that facilitate global connectivity, namely frictionless sharing, or the ability to distribute content quickly and effortlessly across platforms, also incentivize divisive content and emotional extremity.⁶ These systems actively shape public discourse, often in ways that deepen political divides and undermine human rights protections.

The United Nations has recognized the growing threat that unregulated digital spaces pose to global peace and human dignity. In December 2023, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 78/213, urging Member States and technology companies to safeguard human rights in the digital environment, including protections for privacy, freedom of expression, and access to reliable information.⁷ This resolution builds on years of UN work to address the weaponization of online platforms, particularly by state and non-state actors seeking to suppress dissent or incite violence.⁸ UN Secretary-General António Guterres has warned that disinformation is “fueling prejudice and violence, exacerbating divisions and conflicts; demonizing minorities; and compromising the integrity of elections” calling on nations to act with urgency and coordination in confronting these threats.⁹

At the core of these concerns is the issue of affective polarization, wherein political disagreements evolve into deep social hostility and distrust.¹⁰ Social media algorithms, particularly those prioritizing engagement, amplify content that evokes

⁶ Hannah Metzler and David Garcia. “Social Drivers and Algorithmic Mechanisms on Digital Media.” *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37466493/>

⁷ “Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Context of Digital Technologies.” Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2023. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/78/213>

⁸ United Nations. “A/HRC/47/25: Disinformation and Freedom of Opinion and Expression.” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc4725-disinformation-and-freedom-opinion-and-expression-report>. 13 April 2021.

⁹ United Nations. “Secretary-General’s Opening Remarks at Press Conference to Launch the Global Principles for Information Integrity.” <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2024-06-24>. 24 June 2024.

¹⁰ Törnberg, Petter. “How Digital Media Drive Affective Polarization Through Partisan Sorting.” <https://www.pnas.org/doi/pdf/10.1073/pnas.2207159119>. 30 August, 2022.

anger or targets political opponents, leading users to perceive the opposing side not just as wrong, but as morally corrupt or dangerous.¹¹ It is also worth noting that countries experiencing increased political polarization also reported higher incidences of political violence and human rights abuses, including restrictions on free expression, arbitrary detention, and violence against journalists.¹² As digital polarization increases, the line between online speech and offline harm becomes increasingly blurred.

Current Atmosphere

The consequences are particularly acute in fragile political environments. One of the most tragic examples is the detrimental role social media played in Myanmar, where Facebook's recommendation algorithms were found to have "proactively amplified" anti-Rohingya hate speech prior to and during the 2017 ethnic cleansing campaign.¹³ Similar dynamics have been observed elsewhere, such as in Ethiopia, India, and Sri Lanka, where unchecked digital content has been linked to outbreaks of ethnic violence and the deterioration of democratic norms.¹⁴ The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression has repeatedly emphasized the obligation of states and digital platforms to prevent online environments from becoming enablers of hate speech and human rights violations.¹⁵ In this context, the General Assembly's Third Committee (GA3), which addresses social, humanitarian, and human rights issues, plays a critical role in shaping global norms and cooperative strategies to mitigate the dangers posed by politicized and polarizing digital content.

The unchecked growth of digital platforms and their deep integration into civic and political life has created new vulnerabilities for democratic governance and human rights. Weak regulatory frameworks and the rapid evolution of technologies and functions have enabled both state and non-state actors to exploit online spaces for surveillance, censorship, and manipulation. This trend has accelerated over the past decade, with governments increasingly restricting digital freedoms in response to political unrest. For example, Kazakhstan has drawn international criticism for repeatedly shutting down internet access during protests.¹⁶ This tactic has been documented by Freedom House as contributing to the country's declining "Freedom on the Net" score.¹⁷ Such shutdowns not only stifle dissent but also deprive citizens of critical channels for communication and access to reliable information, further undermining public trust and social stability.

¹¹ F. Huszár, S.I. Ktena, C. O'Brien, L. Belli, A. Schlaikjer, & M. Hardt. "Algorithmic amplification of politics on Twitter." <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2025334119>. 21 December 2021.

¹² Piazza, James. "Political Polarization and Political Violence." <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2023.2225780>. 29 June 2023.

¹³ Amnesty International. "The Social Atrocity: Meta and the Right to Remedy for the Rohingya." https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Updated-Final-Report_The-Social-Atrocity-0609202259.pdf. Accessed 9 Aug 2025.

¹⁴ Repucci, Sarah. "Media Freedom: A Downward Spiral." Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-and-media/2019/media-freedom-downward-spiral>. 2019.

¹⁵ United Nations. "Latest Thematic Reports." United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

¹⁶ Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-net/2024>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The rise of an “infodemic,” defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the overwhelming spread of misinformation and disinformation, has compounded these risks, particularly in politically sensitive contexts.¹⁸ Advances in generative artificial intelligence have intensified the problem, enabling the creation of highly persuasive false narratives that can be disseminated rapidly across digital networks. This is especially concerning for younger demographics, who increasingly rely on social media platforms for news consumption, where algorithmic curation often prioritizes engagement over factual accuracy.¹⁹ It is critical, now more than ever, to invest in media literacy and the development of critical thinking and analysis skills, and to combat vulnerability to manipulation and eroding trust in democratic institutions. Strengthening cybersecurity, safeguarding online freedoms, and promoting responsible platform governance are essential to ensuring that digital spaces serve as a tool for constructive discourse and information rather than instruments of division and control.²⁰

Importance of Reducing Political Polarization

Political polarization creates and reinforces a damaging “us vs. them” mindset, in which opponents are dehumanized, seen as morally inferior or even dangerous. Social identity theory and recent empirical research highlight how this kind of partisan “othering” breaks down norms of mutual respect and peaceful political engagement.²¹ Affective polarization undermines democratic principles by shrinking the moral community to one’s own in-group, reducing empathy for opponents and increasing interpersonal hostility.²² Dehumanization, in turn, creates fertile ground for punitive or discriminatory policies that erode civil liberties and social cohesion.

Empirical evidence further demonstrates that high levels of polarization are statistically linked to elevated rates of human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings.²³ Cross-national studies have found that countries experiencing deep affective political divisions also tend to show significantly weaker adherence to physical integrity rights and higher instances of state repression.²⁴ These data underscore how polarization moves beyond political rhetoric, undermining rule of law, rights protections, and democratic accountability.

Reducing polarization is foundational to rebuilding trust in public institutions, restoring political dialogue, and safeguarding civil and political rights, all central pillars of the UN’s mandate under the Third Committee.²⁵ The UN Secretary-General has repeatedly emphasized that participation, inclusion, and institutional trust are prerequisites for peace and sustainable development, stating:

¹⁸ World Health Organization. “Infodemic.” <https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic>. Accessed 9 August 2025

¹⁹ Pew Research Center. “Social Media and News Fact Sheet.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/>. 17 September 2024.

²⁰ Prior, Markus. “Media and Political Polarization.” <https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu>. 2013.

²¹ McCoy, Jennifer and Benjamin Press. “What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/01/what-happens-when-democracies-become-perniciously-polarized?lang=en>. 18 January 2022.

²² Ibid.

²³ Amnesty International. “The State of the World’s Human Rights: April 2025.” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/8515/2025/en/#:~:text=The%202025%20edition%20of%20Amnesty,and%20looking%20to%20the%20future>. 28 April 2025.

²⁴ Montalvo, José G. “Ethnic Polarization, Potential Conflict, and Civil Wars.” *American Economic Review*. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/0002828054201468>, 3 June 2005.

²⁵ United Nations. “General Assembly of the United Nations: Social, Humanitarian & Cultural – Third Committee.” <https://www.un.org/en/ga/third/64/>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

“For that, we need governance models and structures that work for the common good ... rebuild trust between people, institutions and leaders.”²⁶ Likewise, UN DESA policy briefs highlight that low trust and perceptions of partisan manipulation significantly weaken institutional legitimacy and hamper states’ capacity to address crises effectively.²⁷ Critical intervention strategies aimed at mitigating polarization, such as civic education, inclusive political reforms, algorithmic transparency, and civil society engagement, offer dual benefits: safeguarding human rights and preserving social cohesion.²⁸ These efforts align squarely with GA3’s mandate on fundamental freedoms, protection of minorities, democracy promotion, and social development.²⁹ By prioritizing measures that reduce othering and foster inclusive dialogue, Member States can strengthen democratic resilience, bolster institutional trust, and help fulfill Sustainable Development Goal 16’s objectives of peace, justice, and strong institutions.³⁰

Current International Framework

In December 2023, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 78/213, titled *Promotion and protection of human rights in the context of digital technologies*.³¹ Sponsored by over 50 Member States, the landmark text for the first time codifies a holistic commitment by the UN to address how digital platforms impact rights such as privacy, freedom of expression, assembly, and non-discrimination. The resolution explicitly urges both governments and technology companies to implement human rights–centered due diligence, increase transparency, and uphold accountability in content governance and platform design.³²

Within UN systems, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has operationalized this mandate through the development of a human rights due diligence (HRDD) framework for digital technology, officially adopted in 2024.³³ This guidance, rooted in the Secretary-General’s *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation*³⁴ and Call to Action for Human Rights, requires both states and private sector actors to assess and mitigate human rights risks throughout the lifecycle of digital technologies.³⁵ The HRDD guidance is being rolled out across UN agencies and gaining traction beyond the organization as a model for digital governance aligned with global norms.

²⁶ UN News. “Inclusion and More Public Participation, Will Help Forge Better Government Policies: Guterres.” <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1073742>. 25 September 2020.

²⁷ United Nations. “UN/DESA Policy Brief #108” UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs. <https://desapublications.un.org/policy-briefs/undesa-policy-brief-108-trust-public-institutions-trends-and-implications-economic>. 15 June 2021.

²⁸ Bateman, Jon and Dean Jackson. “Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence Based Policy Guide.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/countering-disinformation-effectively-an-evidence-based-policy-guide?lang=en>. 31 January 2024.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ United Nations. “Goal 16: Promote Just, Peaceful, and Inclusive Societies.” Sustainable Development Goals. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

³¹ United Nations. “Resolution 78/213: Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Context of Digital Technologies.” General Assembly. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/78/213>. 22 December 2023.

³² Ibid.

³³ United Nations. “Human Rights Due Diligence for Digital Technology Use.” <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/digital-technology-use-guidance-sg-1-en.pdf>. May 2024.

³⁴ United Nations. “Roadmap for Digital Cooperation.” <https://docs.un.org/en/A/74/821>. 29 May 2020.

³⁵ United Nations. “A Call to Action for Human Rights.” <https://www.un.org/en/content/action-for-human-rights/index.shtml>. 2020.

The UN is also advancing new governance initiatives through the Global Digital Compact, currently under negotiation ahead of the Summit of the Future.³⁶ Civil society actors and UN-affiliated policy experts emphasize that the Compact must establish universally accepted principles for digital rights, including freedom of information, privacy, non-discrimination, and countering disinformation, while ensuring private sector accountability in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.³⁷ Complementing these efforts, UNGA Third Committee dialogue and resolutions on the Right to Privacy in the Digital Age now include new provisions on artificial intelligence and digital literacy, reflecting the evolving landscape of information integrity and platform responsibility.³⁸

Meanwhile, regional and institutional standards support this international effort, urging governments to regulate social media platforms to safeguard freedom of expression and ensure that platform policies are transparent, respect due process, and support independent dispute resolution mechanisms.³⁹

Conclusion

Across multiple frameworks, the emphasis is clear: global normative architecture must span binding resolutions, human rights oversight, civil society engagement, and multistakeholder digital governance. In its approach, the UN Third Committee (GA3) is strategically positioned to reconcile the need for digital innovation with the protection of fundamental freedoms, thereby advancing Sustainable Development Goal 16 and the broader UN mission of promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Questions to Consider

1. Who (states, platforms, civil society, users) can and should influence mitigation strategies?
2. Which SDGs are directly supported by reducing political polarization and safeguarding rights?
3. How do digital inequalities and development levels affect which populations are most vulnerable to polarization-driven human rights risks?

³⁶ United Nations. “Global Digital Compact.” <https://www.un.org/global-digital-compact/en>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

³⁷ United Nations. “UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.”

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf, 2011.

³⁸ United Nations. “A/HRC/56/45: Mapping Report: Human Rights and New and Emerging Digital Technologies.” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5645-mapping-report-human-rights-and-new-and-emerging-digital/>. 20 August 2024.

³⁹ Elswah, Mona. “Investigating Content Moderation Systems in the Global South.” Center for Democracy and Technology. <https://cdt.org/insights/investigating-content-moderation-systems-in-the-global-south/>. 30 January 2024.

Annotated Bibliography

Amnesty International. *The Social Atrocity: Meta and the Right to Remedy for the Rohingya*. Accessed August 9, 2025. https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Updated-Final-Report_The-Social-Atrocity-0609202259.pdf

A detailed investigation into Facebook's role in amplifying hate speech against the Rohingya, providing a good case study of platform harms.

Amnesty International. *The State of the World's Human Rights: April 2025*. April 28, 2025. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/8515/2025/en/#:~:text=The%202025%20edition%20of%20Amnesty,and%20looking%20to%20the%20future.>

This is a global human rights assessment identifying emerging threats and violations, useful for understanding specific issues within broader trends.

Bateman, Jon, and Dean Jackson. *Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence Based Policy Guide*. January 31, 2024. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/countering-disinformation-effectively-an-evidence-based-policy-guide?lang=en>.

This source is a political policy guide synthesizing research on combating misinformation. It offers actionable recommendations for governments and platforms.

Elsawah, Mona. *Investigating Content Moderation Systems in the Global South*. January 30, 2024. Center for Democracy and Technology. <https://cdt.org/insights/investigating-content-moderation-systems-in-the-global-south/>.

This source examines how content moderations systems operate in the Global South, offering valuable perspective on equity, bias, and digital governance challenges worldwide.

Huszár, F., S. I. Ktena, C. O'Brien, L. Belli, A. Schlaikjer, and M. Hardt. "Algorithmic Amplification of Politics on Twitter." December 21, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2025334119>.

This is an academic analysis quantifying how algorithms disproportionately promote certain political content.

Freedom House. “Kazakhstan: Freedom on the Net 2024.” Accessed August 9, 2025.
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-net/2024>.

This is a country specific analysis of digital freedom, highlighting state-controlled internet shutdowns in Kazakhstan as a human rights concern.

Metzler, Hannah, and David Garcia. “Social Drivers and Algorithmic Mechanisms on Digital Media.” *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37466493/>.

A peer-reviewed article analyzing how algorithmic curation shapes social behavior online, provides a strong empirical foundation for understanding polarization and online discourse.

McCoy, Jennifer, and Benjamin Press. “What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized?” January 18, 2022. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/01/what-happens-when-democracies-become-perniciously-polarized?lang=en>

A think tank analysis exploring how extreme polarization erodes democratic institutions.

Montalvo, José G. “Ethnic Polarization, Potential Conflict, and Civil Wars.” June 3, 2005. *American Economic Review*.
<https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/0002828054201468>.

An economic study linking ethnic polarization to civil conflict.

Pew Research Center. “Social Media and News Fact Sheet.” September 17, 2024.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/>.

A data-driven overview of how people consume news via social media, helpful for understanding generational media habits.

Piazza, James. “Political Polarization and Political Violence.” June 29, 2023.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2023.2225780>.

This research article connects polarization to increased risks of political violence, supporting arguments about the dangers of online radicalization.

Prior, Markus. “Media and Political Polarization.” 2013. <https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu>.

This is a scholarly overview of how changing media environments drive political polarization.

United Nations. “Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Context of Digital Technologies.” Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on December 19, 2023. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/78/213>.

This official UN resolution urges states and tech companies to protect human rights in digital spaces, making it a key primary source for international policy positions.

Repucci, Sarah. “Media Freedom: A Downward Spiral.” 2019. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-and-media/2019/media-freedom-downward-spiral>

A Freedom House report documenting the global decline in press freedom, useful for contextualizing digital rights within broader media trends.

Törnberg, Petter. “How Digital Media Drive Affective Polarization Through Partisan Sorting.” August 30, 2022. <https://www.pnas.org/doi/pdf/10.1073/pnas.2207159119>.

This study demonstrates mechanisms by which social media intensifies political hostility.

United Nations. “A/HRC/47/25: Disinformation and Freedom of Opinion and Expression.” April 13, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc4725-disinformation-and-freedom-opinion-and-expression-report>.

This UN report details the human rights implications of online disinformation, offering authoritative guidance for legal and policy frameworks.

United Nations. “Secretary-General’s Opening Remarks at Press Conference to Launch the Global Principles for Information Integrity.” June 24, 2024. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2024-06-24>.

This is a UN statement setting out global priorities for combating digital misinformation, useful for framing multilateral initiatives.

United Nations. “Latest Thematic Reports.” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Accessed August 9, 2025. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents>

A UN database of recent human rights reports. This is a reliable reference point for the latest official findings and recommendations.

United Nations. “General Assembly of the United Nations: Social, Humanitarian & Cultural – Third Committee.” Accessed August 9, 2025.
<https://www.un.org/en/ga/third/64/>

This is an official UN description of GA3’s mandate, providing structural context for human rights debates at the UN.

UN News. “Inclusion and More Public Participation, Will Help Forge Better Government Policies: Guterres.” September 25, 2020.
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1073742>

This is a UN press article advocating for public engagement in governance, supporting arguments on participatory democracy.

United Nations. “UN/DESA Policy Brief #108.” June 15, 2021. UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs. <https://desapublications.un.org/policy-briefs/undesapolicy-brief-108-trust-public-institutions-trends-and-implications-economic>

This is a policy brief analyzing public trust in institutions. This is useful for linking governance quality to information integrity.

United Nations. “Goal 16: Promote Just, Peaceful, and Inclusive Societies.” Sustainable Development Goals. Accessed August 9, 2025.
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/>

This is the official UN Sustainable Development Goal framework on justice and strong institutions.

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II. Human Rights of Prisoners and Conditions of Incarceration

Introduction

The protection of human rights within detention systems is a fundamental concern of international law and global governance. Under frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)⁴⁰ and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),⁴¹ all individuals, including those deprived of their liberty, are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. Nevertheless, in practice, carceral systems across the globe frequently fall short of these standards. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) continues to report widespread violations, including overcrowding, denial of access to medical services, and instances of torture and inhumane treatment.⁴² These systemic deficiencies raise profound ethical and legal questions about the compatibility of existing prison conditions with international human rights norms.

The Nelson Mandela Rules serve as a key reference point for the humane treatment of incarcerated persons.⁴³ These guidelines articulate minimum standards for health, hygiene, legal access, and protection against abuse. Despite broad endorsement of these standards by the UN, implementation remains uneven and non-binding. Reports from the Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment highlight persistent gaps between these normative frameworks and actual practices, particularly in regions experiencing political instability or lacking robust oversight mechanisms.⁴⁴ Vulnerable populations, including ethnic minorities, migrants, and individuals with mental health conditions are disproportionately affected by these shortcomings.⁴⁵

Globally, the scale and conditions of incarceration reflect broader patterns of structural inequality and systemic neglect. According to the World Prison Brief,⁴⁶ more than 10.8 million individuals are currently incarcerated worldwide. Significant numbers of incarcerated individuals are detained pre-trial or for non-violent offenses.⁴⁷ Overcrowding remains one of the most pervasive issues, leading to deteriorating physical conditions, insufficient access to medical and mental health care, and heightened risk of abuse.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ United Nations. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>. 1948.

⁴¹ United Nations. “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.” UN General Assembly. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>. 16 December 1966.

⁴² United Nations. “A/HRC/55/52: Current Issues in Prison Management.” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5552-current-issues-and-good-practices-prison-management-report>. 20 February 2024.

⁴³ United Nations. “Nelson Mandela Rules.” <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/70/175>. 17 December 2015.

⁴⁴ United Nations. “Annual Thematic Reports of the Special Rapporteur.” OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-torture/annual-thematic-reports-special-rapporteur>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ World Prison Brief. <https://www.prisonstudies.org/>. Accessed 11 August 2025.

⁴⁷ Widra, Emily. “Who is Jailed, How Often, and Why.” https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2024/11/27/jail_bookings/. 27 November 2024.

⁴⁸ Penal Reform International. “Overcrowding.” <https://www.penalreform.org/issues/prison-conditions/key-facts/overcrowding/>. Accessed 11 August 2025.

In many contexts, correctional institutions operate in a legal and ethical vacuum, where accountability is minimal and the human dignity of prisoners is routinely compromised. The OHCHR has underscored that these conditions not only constitute human rights violations but also undermine broader public health and social reintegration objectives.⁴⁹

Within the United Nations system, the Third Committee of the General Assembly (GA3) plays a central role in advancing international dialogue on prison reform and the rights of the incarcerated.⁵⁰ The committee's efforts are situated within a broader UN mandate to promote justice, uphold human dignity, and strengthen the rule of law.⁵¹ By fostering cooperation among Member States and supporting adherence to international standards, GA3 contributes to the development of policy solutions that balance security concerns with human rights obligations. As Member States deliberate on this topic, it is imperative that they consider not only legal compliance but also the moral imperative to ensure humane and just conditions for all individuals, regardless of their status.

Current Atmosphere

Recent UN oversight and independent reporting confirm that prison conditions worldwide remain deeply concerning. During the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council in March 2025, the Special Rapporteur on Torture emphasized that arbitrary detention and hostage-taking frequently amount to torture, underscoring how such practices remain prevalent in conflict zones and warrant urgent global action.⁵² Simultaneously, the UN Committee against Torture's Subcommittee visited over 170 detention facilities in 2024, including prisons, psychiatric hospitals, and immigration centers, conducting thousands of interviews. Its reports highlighted patterns of extreme overcrowding, limited access to healthcare, unsanitary conditions, and near-universal impunity for torture and mistreatment.⁵³

Countries across all regions are grappling with systemic overcrowding and degrading detention environments. In France, the Committee against Torture flagged prisons operating at 150% capacity, with some facilities reaching over 300% occupancy.

⁴⁹ United Nations. "Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners." General Assembly Resolution 45/111. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/basic-principles-treatment-prisoners>. 14 December 1990.

⁵⁰ United Nations. General Assembly Third Committee. <https://www.un.org/en/ga/third/67/index.shtml>. Accessed 9 August 2025.

⁵¹ United Nations. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>. 10 December 1948.

⁵² United Nations. "Hostage-Taking is a Cruel Game." OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/hostage-taking-cruel-game-special-rapporteur-torture-calls-immediate-release>. 04 March 2025.

⁵³ United Nations. "Annual Report to the Committee Against Torture." <https://www.unhcr.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2025/04/le-comite-contre-la-torture-entend-la-presentation-du-rapport>. 14 April 2025.

⁵⁴ United Nations. "Experts of the Committee against Torture Praise France's Engagement with the Review Process, Ask about Prison Overcrowding and Excessive Use of Force by the Police." <https://www.ohchr.org/en/meeting-summaries/2025/04/experts-committee-against-torture-praise-frances-engagement-review>. 17 April 2025.

Reports described infestations, insufficient sanitary facilities, lack of natural light, and problematic ratios of staff to detained persons.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, Iraq announced that its correctional institutions were functioning at double capacity, prompting national amnesty efforts to reduce population levels, but raising concerns that justice may be compromised amid the rapid releases.⁵⁵ In the Dominican Republic, more than 60% of detainees are held in pre-trial detention; a prison designed for 2,100 people housed over 7,000 inmates, with documented deaths from neglect and appalling living environments.⁵⁶

Prisoners in conflict-affected settings continue to endure severe abuse. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture has documented allegations of torture, prolonged restraint, sleep deprivation, and degrading humiliation inflicted on Palestinian detainees since October 2023. These abuses are reportedly widespread across Israeli-run prisons and military camps, with many held without charge under administrative detention laws.⁵⁷

Current International Framework

The protection of the human rights of prisoners is underpinned by a comprehensive yet variably enforced body of international law. Foundational among these instruments is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, which proclaims in Article 5 that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”⁵⁸ These rights are further codified in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified in 1976, which mandates in Article 10 that “all persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.”⁵⁹ These legal texts bind most UN Member States, forming the normative foundation for prison oversight and the humane treatment of detainees worldwide.

In addition to these core human rights instruments, the Third Geneva Convention of 1949 establishes detailed protections for prisoners of war, requiring that they be treated humanely at all times and prohibiting violence and intimidation. The Convention sets standards for adequate food, shelter, medical care, and communication with families, while also outlining processes for repatriation and release at the end of hostilities. Although its provisions specifically apply in situations of armed conflict, the Third Geneva Convention has shaped broader expectations for

⁵⁵ Aljazeera. “Iraq frees over 19,000 prisoners under new amnesty, including some ex-ISIL.”

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/13/iraq-frees-over-19000-prisoners-under-new-amnesty-including-some-ex-isil>. 13 May 2025.

⁵⁶ Associated Press. “Dominican Officials Cram Thousands of Inmates Facing No Charges Into Overcrowded Prisons.” NPR News. <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/19/nx-s1-5301669/dominican-republic-prisons-overcrowding>. 19 February 2025.

⁵⁷ United Nations. “UN Report: Palestinian Detainees Held Arbitrarily and Secretly, Subjected to Torture and Mistreatment.” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/07/un-report-palestinian-detainees-held-arbitrarily-and-secretly-subjected>. 31 July 2024.

⁵⁸ United Nations. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>. 10 December 1948.

⁵⁹ United Nations. “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.” UN General Assembly. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>. 16 December 1966.

⁶⁰ United Nations. “Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War.” https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.32_GC-III-EN.pdf. 12 August 1949.

the humane treatment of detainees and reinforced the principle that deprivation of liberty must never entail deprivation of dignity.

Oversight and enforcement are supported by key international bodies. The Committee against Torture (CAT) monitors implementation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, conducting state reviews and issuing recommendations.⁶¹ The Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT), established under the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), carries out preventive visits to places of detention and assists in the establishment of National Preventive Mechanisms (NPMs).⁶² Additionally, UN Special Rapporteurs on Torture and on the Right to Health, appointed by the UN Human Rights Council, investigate prison-related human rights issues and publish thematic and country-specific reports that serve as influential tools for international accountability.

Regional frameworks also contribute significantly to the monitoring and enforcement of prisoner rights. In Europe, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) operates under the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture, conducting unannounced visits to detention facilities and issuing public reports.⁶³ In the Americas, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) monitors detention conditions, grants precautionary measures, and publishes standards such as the “Principles and Best Practices on the Protection of Persons Deprived of Liberty.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines the mistreatment of prisoners during armed conflict as a war crime, signaling that violations in custodial settings may fall under international criminal jurisdiction.⁶⁵ Although gaps in enforcement remain, particularly in authoritarian regimes and fragile states, these frameworks collectively provide the scaffolding for global prison reform and accountability efforts.

Conclusion

The human rights of prisoners stand as a critical barometer of a society’s commitment to justice, equality, and the rule of law. Despite the protections enshrined in international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Third Geneva Convention, and the Nelson Mandela Rules, widespread violations persist in detention systems across the world. Overcrowding, inhumane treatment, lack of access to healthcare, and systemic discrimination continue to afflict prison systems, particularly in low-income countries and conflict-affected regions. These abuses are symptoms of deeper structural inequalities, with marginalized groups disproportionately represented behind bars. This is a global challenge that requires a moral commitment to treat all individuals with dignity, regardless of their status. Without consistent enforcement and national implementation, the impact of existing frameworks remains limited. As Member States continue to deliberate within the UN system, they face a critical choice: will they continue to allow carceral systems to remain sites of neglect, abuse, and inequality? There is growing momentum for reform through international frameworks, regional human rights bodies, and national accountability mechanisms. The actions they take to reform these systems will shape the lives of millions of incarcerated individuals and define the moral standing of the global community itself.

Questions to Consider

1. How have conflict situations (think authoritarian governance or fragile political systems) exacerbated violations of prisoners' rights?
2. How effective have existing UN mechanisms been in improving detention conditions in Member States?
3. How can rehabilitation, restorative justice, and alternatives to incarceration reduce human rights abuses in prisons?
4. What balance should be struck between ensuring public safety, respecting state sovereignty, and upholding universal human rights standards in prison reform?

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